

The Effects of Divorce on Children

Most divorcing parents are very concerned about their children's reactions to their separation and divorce. They want to know, "Will my child grow up to be healthy and happy?" Sociologists and psychologists are just beginning to provide reliable information about the effects of divorce on children.

"Will my child grow up to be healthy and happy?"

Toddlers

We know little about the effects of divorce on children younger than two or three years of age. Young children do not always suffer if a divorce occurs. However, problems may occur if a close relationship or bond between a parent and child is broken. Parents should agree on custody and childcare arrangements so the child does not grow up experiencing conflict between his or her parents.

Preschool children

Children from three to five years of age frequently believe they have caused their parents' divorce. For example, they might think that if they had eaten their dinner or done their chores when told to do so, Daddy wouldn't have gone away. Preschoolers may fear being left alone or abandoned altogether. They may show baby-like behavior, such as wanting their security blanket or old toys. They may deny that anything has changed, or they may become uncooperative, depressed, or angry. Although they want the security of being near an adult, they may act disobedient and aggressive.

School Age children

Some psychologists believe the adjustment to parental divorce is more difficult for elementary school children than for younger or older children. School-age children are old enough to understand that they are in pain because of their parents' separation. They are too young, however, to understand or to control



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their reactions to this pain. They may experience grief, embarrassment, resentment, divided loyalty and intense anger. Their ability to become actively involved in play and activities with other children may help them cope with their family life situation. Children this age may hope parents will get back together. Elementary aged children may feel rejected by the parent who left. They may complain of headaches or stomachaches.

Adolescents

Teens also experience anger, fear, loneliness, depression and guilt. Some feel pushed into adulthood if they must take responsibility for many new chores or care of siblings. Teens may respond to parents' low energy level and high stress level by trying to take control over the family. Others feel a loss of parental support in handling emerging sexual feelings. Teens also may doubt their own ability to get married or to stay married. Understanding the causes leading to their parents' separation, and remembering the conflict and stress of the divorce may interfere with teens' ability to cope with the changes in their family.

Helping children adjust to divorce

Although painful, discussing the separation and divorce with your children will strengthen your relationship with them. It will also maintain their trust in you.

Sharing general information is appropriate when talking with younger children. Adolescents will want more details. Be sure to let them know what the future holds for them. They will want to know what their

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relationship will be with both parents. The most important factor for children's well being seems to be limiting the amount and intensity of conflict between parents. Minimizing the conflict and hostility between parents following the divorce can contribute to the child's growth. Agreement between the parents on discipline and child rearing, as well as love and approval from both parents, contributes to the child's sense of well being and self-worth.

Adapted from: Hughes, R. & Scherer, J. Parenting on your own. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Cooperative